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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 7224
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 2783
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 8923
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 4792
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 3481
RUMICEA/USCENTCOM INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000621

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TAGS: PGOV PHUM PK PREL

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH PAKISTAN MINISTER OF HUMAN
RIGHTS

REF: ISLAMABAD 292

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson, Reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

¶11. (C) Summary: During a February 7 meeting, Caretaker Minister for Human Rights Burney told Ambassador he was struggling to staff and fund his new ministry. He reviewed plans to establish a National Human Rights Commission and drove home his passion for working with trafficked children and the "lost and forgotten" within the Pakistani prison system. He told Ambassador that he would resign in the near future if the government of Pakistan continued to sentence prisoners to death without a massive overhaul of the system. End summary.

¶12. (U) On February 7, Ambassador met with Ansar Burney, the Caretaker Minister of Human Rights, and his son and Vice Chairman of the Ansar Burney Welfare Trust, Fahad Burney. The Minister reiterated many of the same points from his January 17 meeting with Polcouns (Ref), including the lack of funding his ministry receives and his concepts for a National Human Rights Commission. The Minister and his son emotionally recounted the injustices taking place in the current Pakistani prison system while noting their hopes in the realm of child trafficking.

Prison Reform & Threat of Resignation

¶13. (C) The Minister predicted that his time with the Ministry will be short given the upcoming elections, but before he leaves office, Burney hopes to bring the injustices of the current prison system to the public light. As a prisoner himself in 1977 for allegedly making an anti-government speech, Burney began reaching out to his fellow prisoners and learning from many that they had been detained for years without trial, conviction, or a timely appeal. Upon release of his eight-month imprisonment, the Burney was determined to fight for prison reform, one of the pillars of his Trust.

¶14. (C) The Minister and his son explained that through their work with the Trust, they have discovered countless prisoners who have been incarcerated for years without trial or conviction. Reportedly, the police never told many of these prisoners even why they were being detained. According to the Burneys, approximately 70 percent of the current Pakistani prison population is either awaiting trial or sentencing or has filed an appeal, and they were quick to note that many of these prisoners have been waiting as long as 30 years for

their day in court. The Minister also cited problems of overcrowded cells, dismal sanitary conditions, and little to no contact with the outside world, including family visitations for death row inmates.

¶5. (C) The Minister claimed his Trust continues to pay the exit fines for prisoners in his hometown of Karachi and has been working to open non-Muslim places of worship on the prison grounds. The Minister noted that he has contacted the offices of the President, Prime Minister, Supreme Court Chief Justice, and other government officials in order to discuss prison reform, especially death row conditions. However, he reported that no one will return his calls or respond to his requests for meetings. Because of this lack of response and what he perceives as a lack of concern for his Ministry, Burney informed Ambassador that he plans to resign in the coming days if "any more innocent prisoners are put to death without a fair trial."

Child Trafficking

¶6. (C) Ambassador asked for an update on the child trafficking situation. The Minister explained that this is a major focus of his Trust. In what began as a documentary on HBO, Ansar Burney brought to the attention of the world the issue of child trafficking from Pakistan to the United Arab Emirates for purposes of camel jockeying. The Minister praised the grant assistance that he has received from the U.S. and expressed appreciate for having been chosen as a G/TIP "hero." He continues to assist American-based NGOs that in identifying, releasing and rehabilitating these trafficked Pakistani children - some as young as 3 years old.

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¶7. (C) The Minister reported that he and his son recently visited a madrassa in Rajanpur, in rural Punjab, where they discovered that 46 former camel jockeys had been sent. Given that these children have not been exposed to a normal life during their time as jockeys, the Minister fears that these madrassas will take advantage of their lack of worldly exposure and teach militancy to the impressionable boys.

¶8. (C) The Minister lamented that he receives very little assistance on this issue from the government. Echoing his recent local press comments, the Minister alleged that many current and former ministers are a part of the trafficking problem, because they accept payments to ignore the violations. (Note: Burney offered no evidence to support this allegation.)

Comment

¶9. (C) President Musharraf's decision to create a Caretaker Minister of Human Rights is laudable, but the Ministry remains largely a one-man institution. Burney's dedication is unquestionable, but he continues to mingle government affairs with those of his own Trust. Others in the human rights community have criticized him for agreeing to serve under Musharraf, and Burney's growing frustration may make limit his willingness to improve prison conditions and reduce trafficking from a government posting.

PATTERSON